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ABSTRACT

This essay examines language simplification for second language learners as a linguistic and a pedagogic phenomenon, posing questions for further study by considering past research. It discusses linguistic simplification (LS) in relation to the development of artificial languages, such as Esperanto, "pidgin" languages, Basic English, motherese, teacher-talk, and foreigner talk. LS is also considered in relation to first language acquisition. Pedagogic simplification (PS) is discussed in light of the development of frequency-based word lists, graded readers, criticism of simplified learner materials, modification rather than simplification of learner materials, and the schema theory of teaching and learning. (MDM)

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SIMPLIFICATION: A Viewpoint in Outline

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SIMPLIFICATION: A Viewpoint in Outline

Simplification can be viewed as linguistic or as pedagogic although in some cases it may be both. This bipolarity (i.e., between 'linguistic simplification' (LS) and 'pedagogic simplification (PS)' may not be entirely justifiable on several grounds: it may also, in some measure, fail to reflect current understanding of the subject. However, since my purpose here is to provoke thinking as a basis for a dialogue on issues and concerns, neither of these failures need cause concern. On most points I have highlighted a particular viewpoint. At the same time however,I have raised one or more doubts in the belief that doing so should help foreground aspects of a different understanding.

Part A: Linguistic Simplification (LS)

1 LS has been part of several centuries-old effort at designing international auxiliary languages like Esperanto, Ido etc. None of these appears however to have made more than a marginal impact in the global context of language use. Why this is so may have lessons for language simplifiers and applied linguists no less than for designers of artificial languages.

Doubt: In what way can artificial languages be viewed as being simpler? Is it not true, for example, that Esperanto has more inflections than languages like English? Besides, if an artificial language is designed to serve all the functions that a natural language also serves, can it do so if it lacks some 'essential' features of the latter (eg redundancy)?

2 LS also comes into operation in the processes that enter the design and development of pidgin languages and, in time, of the creoles that evolve in their expanding use. This type of simplification, which comes about largely because such languages are generally restricted to 'communicative' functions (thus leaving out most of the 'integrative' and 'expressive' functions: Smith, 1972), appears to have potential for not only theoreticians of language but also for applied linguists and language practitioners. If Schumann is right in saying that pidginization produces "an interlanguage which is simplified and reduced" (Schumann, 1978), a

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study in comparison with other forms of interlanguage should once again interest scholars in related fields of language acquisition.

Doubts: If Corder was right is pointing out that one cannot simplify what one hasn't got (Corder, 1981a), how can we argue that a pidgin is a product of simplification? A pidgin may be (It is!) simple in more ways than one but is it not essentially a result of attempts to communicate in which people draw on the resources that are already available to them, i.e., the language(s) to which they have become exposed?

If a pidgin is not a product of simplification (However see Davies, 1984 "A pidgin is simple because it represents the result over time of speakers' inadequate second language acquisition"), is it not even less true to say that a creole results from processes of simplification? Would it not be more true to argue that a creole is the outcome of a process of 'complexification'?

3 LS made its impact in the now-forgotten scholarly efforts that sought to make Basic English (See Ogden, 1930- & also Richards, (1940-) Everyman's English) the whole world's auxiliary language besides using it as Stage 1 of a systematic programme of second language teaching. BE gained prominence in the English speaking world and , for a time, was hailed as a success story by world leaders in politics (e.g., Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Jawaharlal Nehru) and in language education. BE also aroused applied linguistic interest (e.g. Catford, 1950/1967) although, not long after, it suffered an abortive end.

More recently ideas like Nuclear English (Quirk, 1981) appear to seek a revival of this reform although with much greater emphasis on the morphology and syntax of English and much less concern for frequent words or 'island' vocabularies, to make English as an international language accessible to the growing millions of users across the world.

Both BE and NE require further study and the latter in particular appears as yet to suffer from inadequate detail and defence. A study in comparison may also suggest implications for work in the future.

Doubt: Did Ogden's work really result in a simpler language or was it a claim based on misunderstanding of the many teaching-learning problems that such a reduced language presents? (Benjamim Lee Whorf, for example, thought of BE as "an eviscerated British English with its concealed premises working harder than ever... fobbed off on an unsuspecting world as the substance of pure Reason itself." Whorf, 1956) Also, is NE a truly workable alternative? Is it really possible to

teach such a language? Besdides, for those who end up learning no more than NE, will there not be problems similar to, if not worse than, the ones that are now faced by non-standard users of English?

4 LS has of late received a lot of attention in the study of restricted languages such as motherese, foreigner-talk, teacher-talk etc. Each of these appears to make use of a number of devices (see Long, 1983 for some fifteen different devices that native speakers use to help non-native speakers to understand their speech) and each ought therefore to be of value in engaging the relevant aspects of the teaching and learning of second/foreign languages.

Doubt: What justification is there for lumping together the three 'restricted' languages named above? Each demonstrably serves a different purpose and each can be seen to be a product of a different understanding of one's communicative roles and responsibilities. Foreigner talk in particular can, in one view, be seen to represent comprehension rather than simplification strategies. It should therefore have little of interest for the language simplifier. Besides, none of these languages is comparable to BE in either purpose or in the processes of simplification.

5 LS can be seen at work in what an L1 learner does in learning his/her (its) first language. This has raised issues in language acquisition (LA) and in the study of the stages of development in a child's entrance into the world of 'learning' (Halliday's 'languaging': Halliday, 1975).

Of late research on LA has come to occupy an important place in L2 pedagogy.Studies that support a natural order of acquisition (eg Pienemann, 1989, 1991) and its imperviousness to formal teaching, have come centre stage in discussions of, for example, 'what teachers can(not) teach in second/foreign language classrooms'. A lot of attention is being paid to the place of 'the learner's syllabus' (Corder, 1981) and to how and how far it can be used as a basis for sequencing L2 syllabuses, instructional materials and classroom lessons. A lot of usable insights have also been emerging in efforts to explore interlanguage development under different teaching-learning environments (Selinker, 1972, 1992).

A related but somewhat less well-known point is that of learner strategies. Experience in foreign-language classrooms shows,for example, that a careful learner often makes use of only those aspects or features of morphology or syntax which he/she is sure of at the time of writing. If this be true, there may be reason to believe that such a learner makes use of 'simplification' via elimination.

Doubt: Does interlanguage show at work the main processes of simplification or is it best seen as an example of 'linguistic' complexification? It may be true that a learner's initial hypotheses are derived from universal grammar or from his/her first language, but are they in any way a simplification of the first language? Besides, the learner cannot simplify what he/she has not got. Also relevant here may be Schachter's (1983) finding that there is no evidence that simplified input is necessary for first language learning.

Part B: Simplification of Teaching/Learning (PS)

Simplification of teaching and learning (PS) has also taken several forms and it has once again been raising issues in theoretical research and in its application to language pedagogy:

6 In the 1920s and 1930s scores of researchers (e.g. psychologists like Thorndike, Lorge, Dewey and English language teachers including Palmer and West (For a historical review see Fries & Traver, 1940) worked to produce frequency-based and in some cases 'integrated' (Faucett , 1932) lists of words and word-meanings. A main purpose was to easify the reading of first and foreign languages and subsequently, to provide a 'scientific' basis for the design of teaching materials. Highly valued lists of essential words and word-meanings (eg West (ed), 1953) followed. In the teaching of French as an international language work on Le Française fondamental broke new ground by making use of more insightful approaches (including 'disponibilite' studies and recorded telephonic conversations (Gougenheim et al, 1956) to arrive at an essential teaching/learning vocabulary.

Having suffered a long period of neglect, this movement appears to have staged a comeback, culminating in the 1980s in large computerised studies of representative corpora of written and spoken language, some of which make use of word concordances (Sinclair, 1987) to arrive at the 'real' language. New dictionaries (eg COBUILD), grammars, language syllabuses (Willis, 1990) and language courses (Willis & Willis, 1989-) have been produced making use of the findings of such research.

Frequency studies have had their supporters among language teachers but they have all along been criticised on both linguistic and educational grounds (e.g. McCarthy, 1984). Of interest therefore should be this type of 'simplification' and its widely used products.

Doubt: If frequency studies are no more than "objective studies of materials selected subjectively" (Palmer, 1931), can they ever become representative of the language as a whole? On the other hand is it fair to think of recent concordance-based studies as mainly a revival of the earlier frequency-based studies? Do they not,in their processes and products,differ both in what they seek and in what they offer? Above all, do they not claim to have far greater potential for providing a firmer basis for teaching the 'real' language?

A main result of the earlier efforts at word study and selection were 'simplified' materials, including readers - extensive readers and supplementary readers, limited-vocabulary readers, 'built-in plateau readers' (West, 1926-), graded readers etc. In support of this work there were also papers or manuals justifying the methods of simplification on which they were based (eg Palmer, 1932; West, 1964), their nature and measurable impact. From early days there were however differences of view on how best to simplify and for what purposes etc. More recently (e.g. Lotherington-Woloszyn 1988) there have been insightful studies of how best to go about designing and adopting such materials.

Simplified readers have since been multiplying and the industry is not only thriving but also claims to be steadily improving its wares. Especially for E(S)FL "a plethora of readers ... has emerged in recent years, including rewritten classics, detective stories, adventure stories and the like" (Krashen, 1989). Besides serving the less-proficient beginner-reader, this industry now caters for readers/learners at the relatively advanced (specialist) stages. Every major publishing house brings out readers on new themes or readers that claim to use new ways of simplification (e.g. Heinemann Guided Readers as against Oxford Guided Readers, Longman Structural Readers or Macmillan 'Rangers'). And if their sales are any indication of their value or of the service being rendered, this industry can be seen to be making a sizeable contribution to TEF(S)L and perhaps other languages as well.Careful studies of such work should be of considerable value for teachers and materials designers in the field of second/foreign languages.

Doubt: Is there an established relationship between an author's dependence on word-lists and the quality or character of the materials he/she produces? Do good writers make use of such lists or do they mainly depend on their own experiences as teachers or as writers? Besides, is it true that such materials are really becoming better or is their popularity mainly a product of forceful promotion? Can it not be argued that most simplified readers distort normal discourse and in particular suggest a distortion of the normal patterns of information distribution (Honeyfield, 1977)?

A less generalisable point is the use of a 'definition vocabulary'. Instructional materials for second and foreign language teaching/learning and more particularly foreign 'learners' dictionaries' make use of a limited vocabulary to define words. Does this help make definitions clearer and more comprehensible or does it often result in less accurate (less dependable?) definitions? How helpful/harmful is such a definition vocabulary?

8 Simplification of texts has of late been criticised on grounds that it may be proving multiply harmful. Linguistically it is being doubted if simplification truly results in making for ease of learning. Research on the subject appears to be divided. Whereas, for example, Marks et. al., in a first language study, found that simplification makes reading passages more comprehensible for children, others (e.g. Williams, 1982) find little support for it. A few (e.g. Blau, 1982) find that simplification may in fact impair comprehension. Applied linguists who have made sizeable contributions to ESP materials (e.g. Allen & Widdowson, 1974) have, using examples from actual analysis, argued that where vocabulary or even syntactic simplification takes place, the message often gets complicated (e.g. Widdowson, 1978, 1979). Often, doing so also alters the necessary features of natural-language redundancy, thereby making the task of unpacking much more difficult for the learner (Parker & Chaudron, 1987).

A second, perhaps more widely held, view is that simplification goes against 'authenticity' in the teaching and learning of languages. There seems to be little doubt that controls (linguistic and other) are in perpetual tension with authenticity; the greater the controls the less natural becomes the piece of writing. So if teaching 'communicatively' demands the use of genuine language in 'naturally occurring' contexts, simplification of any kind must be its worst enemy. Use of 'authentic' materials thus stands against the grading and simplification of teaching materials as also of a teacher's own controlled language in the classroom. Of relevance here should be the understanding that linguistic 'usage' need not be the same as appropriate language 'use' in natural contexts of situation.

Doubt: Is authentic the same as genuine in the ordinary sense of that word? Is it also right to argue that authentic materials are necessarily those not written for the language classroom? If there is some truth in the understanding that books are often written with a good idea of who the reader(s) may be, why can't a typical classroom also be seen to constitute such readership?

Secondly, if true authenticity is to be judged by a learner's engagement ith the texts (Widdowson, 1979), is there not reason to believe that efforts that ontribute to making such reader-text engagement more meaningful are capable of roving their value? Are not such efforts relatable to that part of 'methodological' n a wider sense) or 'textual' mediation which results in 'easifying' the reader-text ncounter? Moreover, can they not be viewed as part of those pedagogic strategies hich contribute to desirable forms of 'comprehensible input'?

0 But need we always simplify in order to make this encounter or ngagement more authentic or can the answer come from using alternative trategies? Two such alternatives, both of which have found a place especially in SP/ESP of the last twenty years, are that which seeks to make use of a different pproach to simplification of linguistic materials (e.g. Widdowson, 1978) and that which looks for ways that ease the LSP learner's access to unsimplified/ unadapted naterials (e.g. Bhatia, 1983)

Doubt: (a) Are such 'simple' materials more authentic; are they in fact more readable, more user-friendly? Doubts persist. The relative strengths of 'simplified' and 'simple' may also require some more study. It may not be altogether true to say that all simplifiers fail to take into account content, obscure the communicative structure of texts or produce less readable materials. Successful simplifiers have perhaps all along been taking care of both language and content.

(b) The second idea appears to be more recent (e.g. Swales, 1985) and it is apparently more linguistic than pedagogic. It is based on two kinds of understanding. One, that different 'genres' of language use are characterised by differing features of not only language but also discourse. Both, but especially the latter, are relatable to the purpose of such discourse and the conventionalised ways in which the 'insiders' who use that genre make use of the resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) at their disposal. Secondly, that once these features are analysed fully (through 'thick' language description), it should be possible to teach each genre to those who seek entrance into the specialist domain(s) where it is used. Genre-based ESP/EAP has become an important part of current work on languages for specific purposes (Swales, 1990) and it is premised on the belief that genres can be taught much like any other restricted language, provided the descriptions are full and their translation into instructional materials is done with care.

(c) Related to the work being done on genre analysis in ESP but with additional 'theoretical' inputs from the studies of 'language in society' (Martin, 1985) and another approach to the study of language and meaning(eg Halliday and Hasan, 1976), are some recent initiatives in genre-based study of

primary and secondary school writing, both of what it shows and how it can be improved. Once again the pedagogic purpose of this 'approach' appears to be to easify the pupil's access to academic discourse (or the language of schooling) and once again the belief is that 'awareness raising' may afford part of the answer to doing so.

Doubt: An obvious question to raise is whether genre analysis has anything to do with simplification. In analysing one or another use of language the linguist here seeks to understand the truth as fully as possible. Where he may be said to be adopting a simplification strategy is not in simplifying the input but in helping to ease the learner's entrance into a genre by a process of 'easification' (Bhatia, 1983). Can this be seen as an example of pedagogic simplification?

11 Pedagogic simplification of a different kind appears to be at work in the application of the schema theory to the learning and teaching of reading and listening. An important finding of the theory is that in order to comprehend a text the reader/listener activates his/her world knowledge. Especially in the reading of a foreign language this relevant knowledge - the schemata assumed by the writer, often includes not just linguistic and discoursal features of a text but also relevant knowledge of the culture in which the text operates.Research done in the early years of the 1980s (e.g. Hudson 1982, Adams 1982 or Johnson 1981, 1982) has provided substantial evidence to support the view that background information of different kinds helps a geat deal in making materials more accessible to second-language learners. A good deal of work has been going into helping readers/listeners become aware of the specific nature of their need and to bringing into use the necessary background knowledge that they require to engage the text. Schema theory appears now to have immense potential in contexts where English (or any other world language) has to be acquired as a language of knowledge retrieval and/or generation.

Doubt: The question once again is 'Is the application of schema theory an instance of pedagogic simplification or should it be designated differently?' The answer - that it enhances the possibilities of learning and thereby contributes to more successful teaching, does not necessarily relate to either the purposes or the processes of simplification although it can be argued that it serves the same purpose as any other strategies that teachers use to make input comprehensible on the way to building learner self-reliance.

In Conclusion: There must undoubtedly be much more to simplification - linguistic or pedagogic or both. What is clear however is a) that the subject has been receiving a good deal of attention from scholars whose interests span a vast territory in linguistics (theoretical and applied) and related studies and b) that a lot of questions remain unanswered or half answered. Any attempt to bring some of these together under one cover should, it seems to me, be of considerable value to language scholars and practitioners.

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